



Glynis Cooney

Daughter of Camelot

Empire of Shadows
Book 1

Daughter of Camelot

By Glynis Cooney

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Many of the character names in *Daughter of Camelot* draw from the Welsh tradition on which the story is based. Having grown up with a Welsh name, I understand that pronouncing these names in particular can pose a challenge.

I hope this short guide will help you with several of the names that appear in the novel.

Pronunciation Guide

Deirdre – Deer druh

Rhys - Reece

Nia – Nee ah

Einion - Eye nee on

Corwyn – Cor win

Ronan – Row nan

Sioned – Show ned

Dewey – Dew ee

Maelgwyn - Myle gwin

Cynlas – Sin lass

Ioseff – Yo seff

Heledd – Hel eth

Chapter One

I had to be still and silent or I would give away my hiding spot. I flattened my back into the enormous yew tree that stood at the edge of the glade. As I pressed deep, jagged edges of bark scratched my skin through the thin linen of my shirt. The momentary pain brought any giddiness to an end. My mind cleared. I readied.

“Over there!” Rhys’ voice rang out from behind a stand of trees. I squeezed into the broad trunk as if I could vanish into its breadth. Beads of sweat rolling down my brow and aching arms reminded me again of how much work I put into this. To lose this match now would be crushing. I wiped the moisture away with the back of my hand, matting a damp lock of black hair to my skin.

I paused, listening to the sound of the world around me. Waiting. The jabber of ravens gathered in the treetops will mask much of his efforts to be quiet. My ears must be sharper than my weapon. He has been working on stealth and getting quite good. I must be better.

Gripping the worn leather hilt of my sword, I raised the blade. It was an old training weapon from the fort, smaller than those true knights used and certainly not as sharp. Still, this

battered blade felt right in my hands. Wielding this sword, I cut away the boredom of daily chores and the tedious promise of my future.

Hazy fingers of sunshine poked through the arching canopy of branches above me, illuminating the bright green grasses below. The break in the thicket to my left was open, ripe for ambush.

A twig snapped. I almost heard his curse ring in my mind, bringing a smile to my lips.

I fought the urge to peek around the side of my tree, knowing either Rhys or Ronan would spot me immediately.

Another careful step betrayed by a delicate crush of leaf-litter. Though out of sight, I felt him closing in.

I inhaled deeply to stay calm. I would not make my usual mistake. Acting before it was time has been my downfall. I wiped the perspiration from each of my hands on the old leather trousers borrowed from my brother, never completely releasing my grip on the sword.

Merrick's recent lesson to the men at the fort echoed in my mind. *When out-numbered or over-powered, use surprise.* My muscles tensed, taut like a bowstring. I was ready.

I felt him closer. A presence so familiar to me from the moment I first drew breath, I could tell more from sensing him than by speaking. He was as ready as I, but had yet to find me. I shot from the safety of the tree. Rhys' mouth dropped open in surprise but his sword flew without hesitation. I swung hard, deflecting his blow. The resounding clang of colliding metal crashed through the cries the ravens fleeing above.

Rhys' sword swung again. Mine met the offensive with a crash that made my bones tremble. Tired and sore, I pulled away.

"You'll have to do better," Rhys said. He was panting and stepped back as he wiped the sweat from his eyes with his shirtsleeve. "You'll never become a knight at this rate."

I stared into my taunting twin's violet eyes. My eyes. It was a cruel joke and he knew it. A burning fury extinguished my fatigue, igniting the drive to prevail. Everything else disappeared. This time I will win. As if in anticipation, the glossy leaves of the hawthorn trees surrounding the glade stopped quivering. The wind held its breath.

Rhys raised his weapon. Sidestepping forward, he swung. I lifted my sword and forced myself into the blow. Blade on blade, we stared at one another, mirror images of exhausted determination.

Rolling up onto his toes, Rhys used his slight height advantage to push me down. I tried to counter with my own force, but rocked onto my heels and stumbled back.

"This is it Deirdre!" He sliced the air, locking swords.

Holding tight, I felt my brother tiring, just as I was. A shuddering muscle in his jaw revealed how much he was straining. His sword was positioned too low. Soon he would grow careless. I needed to outlast him.

Rhys' sword flashed up, forcing me off balance. I dove under another swipe and landed with a painful thump on the hard earth. My sword was no longer in my hands.

Rhys' cocky laughter filled the air.

Face down in the dirt, I reached forward and snatched up my weapon. I rolled over and scrambled to my feet. I spat pieces of dried leaves onto my chin, determined not to be humiliated in defeat.

“Surrender?” Rhys arched an eyebrow, suggesting that he was toying with me.

“Never!” I muttered. Gripping the sword tighter, I raised it for attack. I made certain my stubborn smile matched his. “By my King and country, I will bring you to your knees.”

“Better be careful, Rhys,” called Ronan from the edge of the clearing. A long and sturdy young man, Ronan leaned easily against the tree where I once hid and took a loud bite from an apple. “She’s gettin’ good.”

I kept my eyes focused on Rhys. Ronan’s acknowledgement of my skill gave me a renewed sense of confidence.

Rhys swung. I stepped to the right. His blade cut into the ground where I had stood.

I saw the opening and I leapt into it, thrusting my sword forward, throwing all my weight behind the move. Too late, I realized I should have steered left. Rhys bowed his slight body and I flew past, stumbling into the bushes. Frantic, I whirled about. Rhys had my back to the thicket. I was trapped. I glanced over his shoulder, eager for a way to escape this snare, but only spotted my pony Mairwen having her breakfast a short distance behind my brother.

“It’s over, Deirdre.” Rhys lashed out with his sword in a final blow.

I lunged into his assault, pushing up as he slammed down. I

dug my feet into the ground to keep from being knocked back. Then it all seemed so clear. I could win with luck and a distraction. Through clenched teeth, I snapped my tongue against the roof of my mouth, hoping that my message was received.

Suddenly Rhys pitched forward. I ducked to the side in time to watch my brother sail into the very thicket that had threatened to swallow me. Turning to my left, I smiled at my stout mare and fished from my pocket a small piece of pynade, the honey candy the horse loved so much, and held it out to my old friend.

Rhys swore as he struggled to free himself from the bramble. Laughing, I swept down on his sword lying in the dirt and pointed it at him. "You're my prisoner."

Stunned, Rhys tugged at a burr stuck in his tangle of black hair. "You cheated!" he cried.

"I won." Resting my brother's sword on the side of his neck, I smiled. "You're my prisoner."

Ronan let out a surprised laugh. "I think she bested ya this time, Rhys."

Rhys frowned at his friend. "Her horse knocked me down!" He pushed the dull blade aside and took it from my hand. "It wasn't a fair match."

"You're taller than her," said Ronan, "'s that fair?"

"*Bewitching* a bloody horse is just wrong." Rhys shot me a hard look.

I tried not to laugh at his taunts of witchcraft. I never denied that my connection with my horse was deep, but I had been

skimming sweets from the kitchen to train her. I never dreamed that my little mare's desire for candy would be so useful. "It pays to have allies, brother. Would our King be so strong had he not made powerful friends to stand by him?"

"Aye," added Ronan, his mouth breaking into an endearing crooked smile. "Wouldn't Sir Lancelot call on Sir Gareth if he needed assistance?"

"Lancelot wouldn't have to," Rhys snapped. He stood up straight, sheathed his sword and swept the last of the brush from his shirt as if he was flicking off the nuisance of such childish notions.

His self-righteousness, something he had acquired at the fort along with his fighting skills, exasperated me. "You'll have to ask him next time you see him," I said launching my counter to his cruel jabs. It was Rhys' dream to ride alongside the greatest living knight and a bit of a sore spot that he had yet to meet him or even had a hint of an invitation to Camelot.

Turning my back to my brother, I reached out to my pony. I swept my hand over Mairwen's soft chestnut coat and placed my old sword in a sheath under the saddle. I wished that Rhys would concede the cleverness of my win, but acknowledging a loss to me would be too big a blow to his image of aspiring knight. I consoled myself with the notion that this was the first time I'd beaten him in a test of swords since he started training at the fort with Merrick. Still, my need to take aim at him burned strong.

"When was the last time you were at Camelot anyway?" I asked over my shoulder. I bit the inside of my cheek, taking a

wicked pleasure in teasing him.

“I’ll get to Camelot before you,” Rhys said.

“Not after being defeated by a girl.”

Improbable as they were, I had my own dreams of Camelot. The fact that Rhys was likely to realize his stoked both my envy and resentment. When alone with my thoughts during chores, I envisioned being invited to court by King Arthur himself. Once there, life would be one adventure after another be it delivering a message for the King to a distant land or simply riding out on the hunt with Sir Gawain and then sharing those stories in the great hall with Sir Gareth. It didn’t matter with whom or what, only that the King had requested my presence. This dream ensured I would not just be known as my father’s daughter or, god help my soul, a village wife and mother.

“You cheated,” Rhys repeated. His voice no longer carried the sour ring of defeat but the haughty tone of one who has convinced himself he is right.

“She doesn’t have the benefit of your trainin’,” Ronan reminded him.

I grinned at Ronan, happy he was willing to come to my aid in this skirmish between siblings. “That’s right,” I said. “Certainly Merrick would agree that I should use what’s available to me.”

Rhys’ grimace told me that interpreting our uncle’s words would win no argument with him as I only learned of Merrick’s lessons after my brother repeated them for me. “He means real weapons, Deirdre, not dumb animals.”

“Dumb enough to defeat you,” I snapped.

Rhys' frown gave way to a baleful smile as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a smooth round stone flecked with bits of red. He fingered it briefly before flipping the stone into the air and catching it. His battle stone.

Turning away, I tried to ignore a sharp twinge of envy. The stone all but guaranteed that Rhys would one day ride off on an adventure, while I would be left behind.

Holding the stone up to the sunlight, Rhys feigned examining it. He brought it to his lips and blew hot breath onto it before polishing it on his sleeve. "As it is customary to retrieve one's stone upon return from battle, I suppose I will have to lay mine in a very special place. It would be a shame for it to get lost in a pile of common rubble."

The heat of challenge bubbled in my chest. "Another contest," I demanded. "Any horse in the fort's stable against me on Mairwen?"

"I acc—"

"Deirdre!" My older sister Nia's angry voice boomed from the path at the top of the hill behind us.

My face flushed as I felt her tone laced with disapproval. Releasing Mairwen's reins, I turned to face Nia's scorn.

Tall and slim with fine features, Nia's hair was the same flaming orange as our father's giving her a fierce look when she was angry. She stomped into the glade and slammed down her basket filled with cuttings. "You promised Father this was over," she said. She pulled back the hood she wore to keep the sun from her pale skin, revealing a scowl of disappointment.

I struggled to think of a story that justified why I was

wearing my brother's old clothes and sparring with swords. I sighed with resignation. It was too late to lie. While my battles with my brother could be frustrating, my battles with my sister were infuriating.

Rhys muffled a laugh. He threw back his shoulders and puffed up his chest the way the men did at the fort when they meant to educate an underling on the ways of war. "Come now, Nia," he said in his most mature voice. "It was all in good fun. No one's hurt."

Spinning around, Nia faced down her little brother. "No one's hurt, you say?" She stepped closer to Rhys as he shrank back with an uneasy smile. "What about Deirdre?"

"I'm not hurt," I said, though I knew I did not speak to what she meant. "These dull little swords couldn't harm a hen."

"Are the two of you ever serious? Aren't the stories that surround you for being twins bad enough? Deirdre dressing in men's clothing? Fighting? You know people already talk about you being tainted."

Inwardly I cringed at my sister's words, but I have learned not to show it bothers me. "We don't pay attention to ridiculous village gossip," I said.

"The natterings of old women don't trouble us," added Rhys.

Nia's frown gave way to a look of concern. "This goes well beyond the village. Deirdre, your very future depends on your reputation. It's the only thing of value a woman has." Nia grabbed her basket. "Get changed. Bretta has chores for you at the manor."

I groaned and kicked the dirt.

“You’re not a child, Deirdre,” Nia snapped. “Stop acting like one. Girls younger than you are being married at court.”

Stung by my sister’s rebuke, I retorted. “Then why aren’t you?”

Stunned, Nia stood motionless.

I lifted my chin, steeling myself for my sister’s wrath. I defiantly met her eyes. Instead of the anger I anticipated, I saw the shadow of sorrow behind her stern gaze. I turned away as shame wiggled into my gut, mingling with the annoyance already brewing there.

Without a word to either of Rhys or I, Nia flipped her hood up, turned, and headed back up the path toward the village.

Still smarting from my sister’s words but guilty from wounding her, I ducked into the bushes and removed a leather sack from a hollow of interlacing branches. I tugged at my trousers, struggling to slide them down from my hips. Deep red grooves scored the flesh where the trousers were becoming tight, a small punishment for my loose tongue.

I did not want to concede that Nia was right. But under my defiance, I suspected that perhaps I am being silly.

My father reminded me that now that I was a woman, I needed to temper my spirit. He pointed to his wife, Bretta, as a model for which I should follow for a happy future. I could not find the words to tell him that my stepmother terrified me with her complacency, that her unflinching acceptance of other’s opinions and village gossip as truth made me pray at night that I would never grow to be anything like her.

As I pulled off my shirt, the chill of the end of summer

slipped across my bare skin. I shivered as I took a faded yellow linen gown from the sack, lifted it over my head and let it slide over my slim body.

Girls don't pretend to be knights. Women don't go on quests.

I pushed my head through the neck of a heavy orange and yellow woolen tunic. I smoothed the dress down, my transformation complete.

"Milady," Ronan said, bowing and extending a hand as I stepped back into the clearing. I took his hand and lifted the front of my skirts with the other as if I were wearing an exquisite gown instead of the tired tunic. His rough hand was warm and gentle on mine.

I puckered my lips into a pouty smile and said, "Good sir, will you bring me my steed?"

Ronan grinned and ran to Mairwen. I enjoyed the new attention my old friend paid me this summer. I often caught him looking at me the way boys looked at the prettier girls in the village. Growing up I had been my brother's companion and competitor, but my sex had stopped me from moving along with him as he trained in our father's footsteps. Ronan's clumsily disguised appreciation gave me a tingling sense of power, a power that had been stripped from me when I was barred from my brother's side. To think that someone may believe that I too am one of the pretty girls gave me new fields in which to play, however tentatively.

I allowed the edge of my finger to stroke his hand as he passed me the reins. "Thank you," I said, meeting his expressive

brown eyes with my own. My deliberate glance felt bold, a secret acknowledgement of the new connection between us.

“May God spare you if you have intentions toward my sister,” said Rhys wrapping his arm about my shoulders. My heart dropped as I realized my cautious attempt to flirt was so easily discovered. “She’s more trouble than she’s worth.”

Ronan’s cheeks flushed crimson. “We’ve been friends since forever. She’s as good as my own sister,” he mumbled.

My private moment rudely exposed, I gave Rhys a swift jab in the ribs with my elbow. “You’re one to poke fun. Isn’t it that bratty Enid? The newest girl you fumble with behind the barn?”

“Ah, yes, there are so many ladies who desire me aren’t there?” Rhys said placing his hand over his heart striking an overly dramatic pose.

“Girls in the village won’t have naught to do with ye if you’re not more careful, Rhys,” Ronan said. “With all the men at the fort, these girls have ideas of marriage and family.”

“Why wouldn’t they desire a match with me?” Rhys sniffed. “Aside from my looks, wit and charm of course, I am the son of the Chieftain. I stand to inherit Dinas Emrys and, with a bit more training, a spot at the Round Table.”

Turning to me, he bowed to the waist. “And dear sister, certainly you could have your pick of the men at the Fort.”

“I have no desire to be wife at this point.”

“Ah, but Father puts his faith in the fortune told at our birth, no matter what you choose to believe. He knows you’re destined to be the wife of a great man. Perhaps even a king?”

I pulled my small horse to follow me along the packed dirt

path. “Where are the stories of the glory won by wives?” I scoffed. “I know I will never become a knight, but I wish to be known for something other than his wife and their mother.”

“Deirdre,” Ronan said, “I th—”

“But it’s been foretold!” Rhys called out. “We’re destined for greatness. I am to be a brave knight and you a fertile mother. Doesn’t Father say you will be blessed with a thousand sons?”

I kicked a rock into the underbrush. “Nonsense.”

“I think it sounds pretty good,” Rhys said, grinning at Ronan.

“It’s absurd,” I muttered. “Unless born a hen, how can anyone be mother to a thousand anything?”

Rhys trembled with mock excitement and he winked at Ronan. “Think of it. Some future king is just waiting to snap you up and make you his bride! You can fill a castle – maybe a dozen castles – with your squealing brood.”

Rhys’ words conjured up the images that made my mind race on sleepless nights. I pictured a great sow suckling a never-ending litter of hungry babes, each clamoring over his brother for more. I’d grown up watching the women in the village, my own stepmother, as they cared for several crying children while tending to their duties. Many carried the smallest on their hip yet their bellies were already swollen with another. I made a silent vow to never be with child. No matter what prophecy said.

“This isn’t something to laugh about, Rhys,” Ronan said, rubbing at the dirt embedded in his calloused hand. “I can understand not wanting to fulfill the destiny of one’s birth.”

“Don’t worry, Ronan,” Rhys said. “As soon as I am knighted, you will be free from the drudgery of the fields to ride as my squire.” He threw his arms out commanding the very clouds to listen. “Together we will change the world!” he called out for all to hear.

The words came to me without thought, the truth tumbling from my lips as if my heart was speaking. “I intend to walk a path of my own choosing. Not one dictated by decorum or dreamed up by those who do not know me.”

Rhys frowned at me, pausing, searching for a retort. “Nia was sent to Degannwy at twelve, I wonder why you haven’t—”

Ronan grabbed his arm. “S enough.”

Rhys pulled his arm free from his friend’s grasp. “Fine.”

“I will be more,” I said. I felt it like my own skin, the need to be something more than what was planned for me. What more was, I did not know.

I ignored the boys as I marched up the hill. Paying no mind to my brother’s teasing was the only way to make him stop. Nonetheless the seed of worry had been planted. Nia had been sent to court on her twelfth birthday. It was a fact I tried to forget, particularly as my own birthday drew close. I had been overlooked at twelve, and again at thirteen. I had come to hope that each birthday would bring the same. I did not know why I had the privilege to be spared while my sister had not, but to raise it as a question would only draw attention to my advantage, and possibly place it in jeopardy.

It was custom for girls borne to nobility, and lesser nobility even more so, to be sent to the church or to the local court to

solidify relationships between powerful families. In both instances, women's lives were directed by strict rules of conduct and duties. It was a responsibility I had no desire to fulfill.

After a few moments of steady silence, the boys hurried to join me.

“Lovely afternoon,” Rhys said contritely.

Smiling, I placed my hand on his arm. I could never stay angry with my brother long. I knew him too well. Behind all his bluster his heart was gentle and kind. And it was indeed a lovely afternoon. The summit was bathed in the glow of late summer. Golden sunlight cut swaths through the mountains, poured over the orchard and spilled onto the fields recently harvested of wheat. Beyond lay my village Dinas Emrys nestled in the crook of a gray rocky hill that held the fort bold and imposing above.

The vision of my home filled me with pride. To be a part, however small, of creating the future knights of King Arthur's court was a noble purpose, I told myself. I thought of Nia returning to court at Degannwy and the blunt ache of pity formed in my breast. Poor Nia. It would tear my heart to pieces to be sent away so young and so far from all that I loved. No wonder she acted so bossy when she visited.

As sure as the sun was there before us, a thick cloud passed overhead casting a dark shadow where we stood. An icy mountain wind swept down and, like a frozen kiss, pressed the back of my neck, making me shudder. I looked onward to the village. People went about their chores, tending gardens, hauling wood or apples. My eyes were drawn to the newly thatched roof of the manor, glowing as if laid with gold.

“Maybe tomorrow we should try the two pronged attack I just learned at the fort,” Rhys said.

My heart lit up. “That could be fun. Ronan, you can join us can’t you?”

“I think so,” Ronan said.

“Marvelous,” Rhys said. “We will take turns fighting off two attackers. Unless Nia puts an end to it.” Rhys wrapped his arm about me and gave a gentle squeeze.

“Let’s have a celebration for Nia before she returns to Degannwy,” I said. My newfound sympathy for my older sister buoyed my spirit with a feeling resembling maturity. “She’s only so fussy because she’s saddened by living away.” My words were taken from my lips by a swirling mountain breeze and the worries about my own fate were carried along with them.

Chapter Two

Small clusters of white clouds stood motionless in the bright morning sky. Below, chickens scratched and pecked at the dry earth seeking stray grains. Rhys and I squatted on the ground behind the stable, examining a stack of drying birch saplings. Only the straightest would be chosen as shafts for new arrows.

I lifted a length of birch and admired its smooth, fine line. Rhys worked his knife into a flat end of another to form a notch for the bowstring.

“Not too deep,” I cautioned. “That last batch hung.”

Rhys wrinkled his nose in annoyance, but eyed the groove he’d made. He ran his knife over the end to shave the rough edges smooth. “What do you think Father will give you for our birthday?”

I shrugged. “Bretta will make certain it’s an *appropriate* gift. A cauldron or cooking dish of some kind for my dowry.” I set down the shaft and drew a long, grey goose feather from a skin bag tied to my waist. I worked the blade of my knife between the vane and quill. It peeled away slowly leaving the feather flat and even. Pleased, I held it up and smiled.

“Right or left?” he asked.

“Right.” I placed it in a pile of feathers plucked from the right wing. We needed to be certain all the flights flew in the same direction.

“Has Father received your armor?” I asked.

Rhys beamed at the mention of his very own chain mail tunic. Then the corners of his mouth dipped. “Even if it’s ready for our birthday, Merrick says I have a lot more to learn before knighthood.”

I looked at him with mock horror. “Then what would happen if the Picts attack?”

“Filthy barbarians wouldn’t dare,” Rhys said dismissively.

The barbarians of the north could only reach us so far south by sea, and Dinas Emrys was distant from the coast. Yet, the specters of those savage tribes from the edge of the earth were a favorite game for us as children. Battles fought with the Picts were unlike those against the Angles in which armies clashed head on. Stories surrounding skirmishes with the Picts tell of an unholy people capable of vanishing into the land or changing into animals until it was time to strike. Their use of witchcraft and shadowy forces for advantage was well known and the tales of how they sacrificed their own children to their dark gods made it easy for my brother and I to slay them in our sport.

“But they have,” I insisted, trying to get my brother to join my game. “And they’ve overrun the village. You, Sir Rhys, are the last of King Arthur’s men. Everyone’s been gutted – that is, except for the delightful Enid.”

I sprang to my feet. Throwing my hand to my brow, I cried out, “Oh, help me. Somebody, please help me. Oh, where is my brave Sir Rhys?” Then jumping to the side, I snatched the feathers from the ground and growled deeply, “I have you now wench and I will make you my barbarian bride!” I danced

around my brother swinging my imaginary captive as my partner. My feet followed the steps Nia had taught me for the wedding reel. I loved to dance, but it was only special occasions that Father permitted frivolous amusements.

Rhys leapt up and grabbed a long birch branch from the pile. He pointed it at my chest. "In the name of God and King Arthur, unhand her." He swung the stick as if preparing for battle. Laughing, I continued my dance, dodging his playful thrusts with quick steps and twirls. He lunged at me and I rushed off with the feathers clutched in my fists. Escaping around the corner of the stable, I ran straight into Merrick.

Startled, I looked up at him and, grinning with embarrassment, quickly put my hands full of feathers behind my back. Merrick looked down at me sternly. A twinge of worry worked my mind that my uncle, whom I idolized, would see me as the silly child I am. Though many years younger than my father, Merrick held the same air of authority. Relieved I saw the blond beard framing his mouth, reveal a broad smile of handsome white teeth. He put his hands on my waist and effortlessly spun me around.

"I have been looking for you," he said. "Where's your other half?"

At that moment Rhys came bounding around the corner. "Merrick." He put out his arm and they clasped one another at the elbow, greeting in the manner of knights. "I thought we were to train later."

"We are, we are. Your father sent me after you. He has some news and he would like you to join us at the manor."

“What is this news?” I asked. I slipped the feathers into two sheepskin pouches hanging at my waist. Father’s news usually had something to do with village affairs, but with our birthday fast approaching I hoped it would be something special.

“You can tell us now can’t you?” Rhys added.

“I am but a humble errand boy,” Merrick said. He grabbed my hand and brought it to his mouth and kissed it. “Your father is my best friend. How would it be for me to spoil his good news?”

“It is about our birthday!” I exclaimed.

“It must be,” Rhys said. “It’s only a few days away. What does he have planned?” Merrick only smiled and refused to answer. He escorted us from behind the stable and onto the road that led up to the manor.

My mind wandered through the possibilities of what my father might surprise us with. Often the best surprise news was a visit from a traveling knight. Oh, the stories they had to tell about life with the High King and the adventures they went on. I tried not to allow the sight of Merridyth hanging out freshly dyed fabrics dampen my spirits.

Since I could remember, Merridyth had been quick to remind me that in other villages twins would have been put to death at birth to ward off ill fortune and witchcraft. And though Merridyth never said so directly, she often suggested that it was the curse of bearing twins that had caused my mother to die so young. I wondered if there was any truth to the old woman’s accusations.

As much as I pleaded, my father refused to tell me much of

my mother nor would he tell me why. And when he did mention her, it was with a wistful, faraway look in his eye as if the memories were painful to revisit. When he married Bretta, I feared that my mother's memory had been forever banished to a place so deep in my father I would never gain access. My future was foretold and my past denied.

Merrick nodded his head to the old woman as they passed. "Merridyth," he said in his most ingratiating tone, "you mix the richest colors in all of Gwynedd!"

Merridyth gave him a flicker of a smile, but her suspicious gaze moved fitfully between Rhys and I. Her dye-stained hand reached to her neck and raised the small charm that rested there. The tiny polished bronze mirror meant to reflect evil away from its wearer. Many men and women in the village kept talismans against malevolence and evil spirits. It was not lost on me that in times of worry or strife these charms were often pointed in my direction.

By the kitchen, which stood just outside our home, my tiny sister Gwen sat alone, crying on the ground. I swept her up into my arms and kissed her all over her wet cheeks. "This is no time for tears, sweetness. What's wrong?"

"Ma ma ma," she babbled pointing at the manor.

"Aww." I hugged her tight. "Your momma is close." I understood all too well her sadness at being separated from the security of her mother though she had yet to learn the words to tell me. Holding Gwen propped on my hip, I walked with the men to the manor.

Merrick threw open the door to the hall. "Corwyn Hael son

of Gwynn,” he called out, commanding the attention of the near empty room, “look who I found battling raiders behind your stable.”

A large wood table lined with benches dominated the long room of the manor. At the far end, the hearth smoldered, the smoke rising through an opening in the roof. A narrow passage off to the side led to sleeping chambers, a luxury reserved for the chieftain’s family. And luxury it was. Particularly when Nia was away at court and I had the bed to myself.

Nia placed a bowl of apples on the table and smiled as we entered. Merrick made a sweeping bow to her. “Milady.”

“You’ve found them,” Bretta said. She took Gwen from my arms and ushered her and her other small chattering daughter, Alis, to the back of the room and commanded them to be quiet before looking at Rhys and I.

My father married Bretta four years past and I had yet to find peace with her though I loved my new sisters dearly. When Bretta first arrived, I did not trust her tentative efforts to be my ally. As she stayed with us, her weak attempts to parent me simply made me angry that she imagined she could replace my true mother. I had grown fine without her, and needed nothing she could give. She was my father’s wife and mother to my kin, and as such I tolerated her presence and her domestic authority. For all my father’s pleading, I could not find the charity to make her my friend.

Bretta shook her big, blond head and looked up to the heavens. “Don’t the two of you look a fright with hay sticking out of your ears! Tsk.” She tried to pull a strand of hay from my

hair, but I brushed past her to join my brother kneeling in front of our father.

“Oh Father, you must tell us now,” we said in unison. “What is your news?”

“Patience,” Father cautioned us.

A shaft of sunlight squeezed through a small window, landing on my father’s mane of red hair, making it glow like embers. As he looked down on us, I was reminded why he was such a good chieftain. His inviting smile made friends of strangers and soothed the most troubled spirit.

He shifted himself in his chair, and set down the crutch that substituted for the right leg he lost in a battle long ago. Reaching out, he cupped each of our faces. “You two bring me so much joy.” He leaned forward, placed his mouth between our ears and whispered, “I look into your eyes and see your mother looking back at me so filled with love.” As he sat back, he shot a quick, guilty glance at his new wife.

“So,” he started, gathering his voice from deep in his chest, “It’s soon to be your birthday.” His smile stretched down to us.

“I knew it was about our birthday,” whispered Rhys.

“Hush,” Nia said quietly. “Let Father speak.”

“As I was saying,” our father continued, tapping me on my dark head, “your birthday. Fourteen. Where has the time gone?” Father grew grave and sought out his son’s gaze. “Rhys, Merrick tells me you have been doing very well in your training. Is this the course you wish take?”

Steadily, Rhys looked into his father’s eyes. Without his customary smile he said, “Father, I have no other path.”

“I am delighted to hear this, my son,” he replied said. “Delighted. I am confident Merrick is equally pleased to hear this as he has requested you enter training full time. If you are willing, you shall join the rest of the men in the barracks.”

Rhys’ eyes grew wide and a huge smile brightened his face. His body trembled as he struggled to keep from leaping into the air with glee. “This is wonderful news, Father, I couldn’t have asked for anything better.”

He turned to me. “I will visit you daily if at all possible. I assure you that—“

“Rhys,” interrupted our father, “allow me to finish. It is not only your birthday.”

He ran his hand through my hair. “My darling daughter, what shall we do with you? Wild and headstrong as you are, you are still my little girl. Some believe I have not done right by you; allowing you to spend more time with boys than on women’s work. Perhaps they are right,” he said. Looking a little at loss. “But more than anything I want to see you happy.”

Father glanced up to the rafters as if trying to gather wisdom from some unseen spirit hiding there.

The tone of his voice made me anxious. I tried to look down to the floor, but his hand caught my chin and brought my gaze back to him. “How old is that silly pony of yours now? Mairwen?”

“She’s twelve, sir.”

“Twelve. Well, I don’t think that will do for such a fine rider. Tomorrow Merrick will accompany you to the market and you may have the horse of your choosing.”

My mouth fell open in astonishment. Elated, I rose to hug Father, but he gently pushed me down. "Deirdre, the horse is yours to keep, but it will serve another purpose. It will take you on your journey." Father looked at me solemnly and searched my eyes for understanding.

"Journey?" I repeated.

Something twisted uncomfortably inside me like a worm boring its way through an apple. Rhys grabbed my hand but I was too stunned to clasp back. I shook my head back and forth not wanting to know the answer to the questions surging in my mind. I wanted everything to stop in that moment, never to move forward to the blasted inevitable.

"You are going with me, to Degannwy," Nia said.

I looked up at her in disbelief. "I don't want to go! How will I..." My dismay and rising misery lodged in my throat. I was so desperate not to be seen crying but felt I was losing my battle. I turned to Rhys. His face had fallen. He mirrored my own expression of shock and disbelief.

"Castle life is good for a girl," Bretta said cheerfully. She folded her thick arms across her swollen belly. "You'll never get married running about the woods with boys."

I whipped my head around, scowling at her. Her speaking up gave me the opportunity to save my tears and put anger in their place. "This was your idea? You want a way to be rid of me?"

"Deirdre!" barked my father.

I stared at him. "She's just like Merridyth and the others. She believes we're cursed."

Bretta's broad face paled and her eyes widened. "Oh, dear

child. Honestly, I have nothing but good will toward you.”

I leaped to my feet with my hands balled into fists. Bretta stepped back bumping into the wall. Rhys grabbed me by the wrist, holding me back.

“What kind of curse shall I put on you?” I hollered. “That’s what you’re worried about, isn’t it?”

“Deirdre, enough!” Father shouted.

“I could turn you into a crone! Or perhaps a dog is more fitting!”

Bretta cringed. Skittering along the wall, she pushed her curious young girls back into her chamber.

Rhys, standing now, held me tight. “Deirdre, calm down,” he whispered. “This won’t help.”

I clenched my teeth and closed my eyes. I gave myself to my brother’s embrace, the swell of furious emotions replaced by the numb realization that I was condemned. The hall was silent but for the sound of my heavy breath and Bretta’s sobs seeping in from the next room.

Nia spoke first. “It was me,” she said.

I opened my eyes and stared at her.

“I asked and Father was gracious enough to let you go,” she continued. “I thought you could keep me company when I returned to court. It occurred to me that Rhys would be busy at the fort and you might find yourself somewhat alone. So, if you care to hex someone, please direct it where it belongs.”

“Father?” I said, “Is this true?”

“Of course it is,” Nia said. “At court you will learn the ways of a lady and be introduced to potential husbands. You can’t go

on playing games forever.”

“I...I...”

“She intends to walk a path of her own choosing,” Rhys answered for me. “Not one dictated by decorum or dreamed up by those who do not know her.” Hearing my words, my truth, come from my brother freed me from my sense of doom. “She will be more.”

Our father closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. “I should have been prepared for this,” he muttered. “It was wrong of me to hold onto you both for so long.” He pointed to Rhys. “Let her go, boy.” Rhys loosened his grip on me.

“You,” he said loudly and breathing deeply through his nose, a sign I recognized to mean he was trying control his ire, “apologize to Bretta. This is my house and she is my wife. I will not tolerate you, or anyone, speaking to her in that manner.”

I moved slowly to the doorway, ashamed of my childish outburst. Sheepishly, I pressed my face against the jamb and called into the room. “Bretta? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.” I paused and turned to my father. His look told me I needed to do more. “Honestly, I don’t know how to hex anyone. And if I did, well, I wouldn’t hex you.”

Father threw his hands in the air and groaned.

“Go away, Deirdre,” sobbed Bretta. “Just leave.”

“I need to make sure she’s all right,” Father said. He pushed himself up on his crutch and swung toward the doorway. Nia went to him taking his arm in support while glaring at me over her shoulder. He stopped at the doorway. “I’m sorry you are unhappy with this news, Deirdre. But it’s for the best and my

decision is made. You leave with Nia in two days time.”

My brother and I instinctively bowed our heads as Father left. The room fell silent.

I gazed at my fingers entwined with my brother’s. Then, I felt a hand rest on my shoulder.

“Perhaps, now would be a good time to ready for market,” Merrick said, his voice commanding but gentle. “If we leave early, we will see the finest horses the following morning. It seems we are charged with finding two excellent horses. A sturdy horse of quality breeding will make a fine gift for King Maelgwyn at Degannwy.”

Chapter Three

“It’s a beautiful day to ride into Tan-Ian.” Merrick smiled into the bright morning sunlight. He was dressed in a padded leather tunic and seated on a glorious gray mare. With the gilded hilt of his sword shimmering at his side, he looked the part of a proud knight. “We may even have an adventure or two on our way.”

I flicked an unhappy smile and avoided looking at him by refastening the heavy brooch that held my purple wool cloak closed. Thinking of how horrible I had been to Bretta, I couldn’t face Merrick. For most of my days I had hung on his words and wisdom, drinking in his stories of Camelot and how King Arthur changed a world of chaos into one with a code of honor. Merrick always said that the worthy measure their passion with sound judgment. I had allowed my feelings and my tongue to get the better of me.

“Don’t try to cheer her up,” Rhys called from the stable. “She believes she will be unable to atone for her words yesterday if she enjoys herself today. Isn’t that so, sister?”

I didn’t respond but Rhys was right. I felt guilty about being excited to go to market when I had acted so horribly to Bretta. I could only imagine how disappointed my father was with me,

and given that I avoided him since my spectacle. I yanked on a thick leather strap affixing my bag to Mairwen's saddle.

"You wouldn't recognize the manor," Rhys continued, "It's never been so clean. I believe she even chased the mice from the thatching. Then, this morning, there was a huge breakfast. Perhaps our Deirdre should atone more often."

Ignoring his needling, I pulled myself onto Mairwen's back and tucked my front foot under my back leg. It wasn't the most elegant position, but gave me more control over my mount when forced to ride like a lady.

Merrick came alongside me. "What is done is done. Look to the future and think of what you may do differently next time. This is the last we will speak of this."

"Yes, sir." I met his gaze. The warmth of his smile raised the corners of my lips. I almost believed all was forgiven.

"That's a start. Now, who knows a song to carry us on our way?"

Rhys belted out a travelers' tune and was soon joined by Merrick. Eventually, even I could not keep the infectious melody from lifting my tongue. We rode down the main road to Tan-Ian singing as one.

"Oh, I climbed the mountains

And I swam the seas

All for the girl I love..."



The high summer sun had eased into the trees by the time

we reached the edge of the market camp. Winding our way through the camp, we passed dozens of people settling in. Some set up elaborate tents as if they meant to stay for some time. Others squatted around small flames cooking meals, the only evidence they planned to stay at all. A few looked up curiously watching them pass. The same curiosity made me stare back. Most paid no mind to just another group of buyers seeking out a place to pass the night.

“Good day, Sir Merrick,” called a man wrapped in a faded orange cloak.

Merrick raised his hand. “Good to see you my friend.”

The man smiled and nodded at Rhys and I as we rode past.

“Who was that?” I asked.

“I’m not certain, but he greeted me as a friend and I can never have too many of those.” The knight winked at me.

I took in the sights and smells of this new world. At Dinas Emrys, apart from occasional passing knights or Brother Tudno’s visits to teach the village of the Lord, the odd peddler was a spectacle. Here, unfamiliar songs accompanied unknown instruments that wailed and hummed with strange sounds. Conversations drifted by in languages that made no sense. And then there were the smells. Some tantalizingly sweet. Others so awful they caused tears to prick my eyes. I put my cloak over my nose and mouth to keep the putrid air out of my body.

“Our kingdom for the night,” Merrick declared. He dismounted at a clearing on the outer edge of the camp. Rhys and I quickly tended to the horses, laid out our bedrolls, and took food from our packs. As we ate bread and cheese, Merrick

sauntered over to a neighboring camp. After a brief conversation, he returned with a smoldering stick and set about lighting a fire in an old pit circled by stones.

“Never doubt the kindness of strangers,” he said. “There is always someone willing to help a fellow traveler. ‘Tis a good lesson for the both of you to remember as you start your journeys.” Rhys nodded his head while taking another deep bite from a stiff biscuit.

“I mean this for you too, Deirdre.” Merrick pointed the smoldering stick at me. “Often it has been the kindness of a lady that has saved my skin. You will do well to remember this when you are off on an adventure.”

“But I have been banished to the sewing circles of court.” I shuddered, as if by saying these words aloud I secured my fate. “There are no adventures in my future.”

“Nonsense.” Merrick snorted. He reached into a deerskin sack and pulled out a piece of salted meat. “Do you know the road to Degannwy is fraught with danger?”

“They’ll be traveling with a company of guards,” Rhys said. “Any thief would be mad to challenge them.”

“Thieves? Do you really believe I would consider a common thief to be any match for these young women?” Merrick turned a serious face to the boy. “Understand me, Rhys. Your sisters are rare ladies. And I am well aware what you’ve been teaching Deirdre. In fact, I admire you for it.” Rhys smiled and sat up straighter.

“But it is not the common folk you need to fear.” Merrick paused to push a pointed stick into the meat. “Have either of

you heard tell of Cath Palug? The Clawing Cat?” We shook our heads. “He’s a vicious, brutal animal. A cat the size of a horse!” His voice grew deep but quiet. “And I’ve heard he can slice a man in two with one swat of its paw.”

Rhys stopped chewing. My eyes widened, waiting for Merrick to continue.

“It is said this cat defeated an army of one hundred and eighty men in a single battle. How this happened I am unsure since no one survived to tell of it.” Merrick leaned forward and set the stick above the flame in front of him. “I believe it was Sir Gareth who came across a dying soldier of that ill fated attack. The praiseworthy man told him of the wicked beast. I know you are both aware that Sir Gareth is most honorable and one to be held to his word. He told me himself that the soldier lay in his arms, disemboweled, and used his last breath to utter the Cat... the Cat...” Merrick’s words faded, swallowed by the darkness around them. “That is just one of the many terrors that line your path my dear.”

“Isn’t that the animal Sir Kay killed?” Rhys asked.

Merrick coughed abruptly, nearly knocking the stick bearing his roast into the fire. “Sir Kay? Rhys, you have much to learn about knights and their stories. I know Sir Kay quite well. While he is true to his king and a valiant knight, I also know him to exaggerate, particularly when he’s enjoying his ale. I hate to doubt the word of another member of the Round Table, but until I see Kay present that cat’s head on a platter, the beast still roams the hills leading to Degannwy.”

“A big cat is not enough to worry me,” I said pretending an

ease I did not feel. “I’m certain that if this Clawing Cat comes near I will bring it down with one shot from my bow.” I made the motion of pulling back on my bow and firing.

“So the death cat is not enough for you, eh?” Merrick dropped his voice again. “What do you think of ghosts? Tortured souls wandering about in the night, seeking something they cannot find. Are they kind? Are they hungry?”

“Are there really ghosts on the path to Degannwy?” I asked with a shudder.

“Oh, I could go on all night about ghosts, but then I’d also have to get into troublesome things like the cauldron borne, poor fallen soldiers brought back from the dead to fight again. With that I’m afraid you wouldn’t get any sleep.” Merrick pulled the hot meat from the fire. “Now that I’ve mentioned sleep, it may be a good idea for the two of you to get some. I don’t want to have trouble waking you in the morning.”

We settled down onto our rolls and covered ourselves with our cloaks. Rhys and I lay in the moonlight staring into each other’s faces with shining eyes. What will our lives be like when we are no longer together?

Rhys rubbed his eye with the back of his hand. “Must be something in it,” he muttered and turned his back to me, pulling the cover over his shoulder. I watched his side rise and fall with each breath. Unseen in the darkness, a tear fell from the corner of my eye too.



The sound of coughing from a nearby camp pulled me from my sleep. I sat up and peeled off my dew-laden blanket.

“Good morning,” Merrick said.

I pulled my thick braided hair from the back of my tunic and stretched. “Morning. Shall I be the one to wake him?” I gently kicked Rhys’ bottom. His hand darted out and grabbed my foot.

“Let go!” I laughed, hopping and twisting, trying to free myself from his grasp.

Rhys released me and sat up. “G’morning.” He yawned and scratched his chin. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Nothing warm,” Merrick said. “We need to be early. The market will be quite busy and we want two of the finest horses.”

I danced with excitement. How would I know when I found the right horse? Should I choose a stallion or mare? Looking at Mairwen, I was suddenly overcome by a feeling of disloyalty. I was about to betray my good friend. I leaned over and whispered, “I’ll make sure you are well taken care of.”



The hectic activity of the market made me dizzy. Prancing, snorting horses of all sizes and colors were displayed by men equally as different. Hawkers called out, enticing buyers with promises of good breeding and great bargains. Old men in shabby robes bartered foul smelling cooked meats and bruised apples out of baskets. Many of the people milling about looking at the horses were odd too. Some were boisterous, others

secretive and sly. More than a few were filthy and smelled of rot. One group stood out because of their austere woolen cloaks and somber expressions.

Catching my curious gaze, Merrick said, “Monks. They are holy people and best to be left alone.”

He pushed ahead of them through the crowd. “The seller I’d like to see is this way.”

We forged through the sea of strange people when a flash of brilliant white caught my eye. I stopped in my tracks, allowing the others go on without me. I stared at a beautiful white horse, shaking its head and prancing, its shining coat gleaming like the sun. Unable to restrain myself, I squeezed through a group of men to get a closer look.

An elderly horse keep, wrapped in long scarlet robes, spotted me staring at the stallion and made his way to me. He brought his cragged face close to mine and said quietly, “Ah, he’s a magnificent beast, he is.”

I looked at the old man and realized he was in fact an old woman under all the creases and jutting gray hairs. Her ashen face was startling. Blue lines streaked her flesh like fingers of faded water. Instinctively, I recoiled.

“This stallion is a direct descendent of the herd of Epona herself!” said the old woman, edging closer. I stared at her confused, wondering who or what Epona was.

“Surely you know of Epona?” said the woman almost in disbelief. “Child, a girl like you who obviously knows a fine horse should be well acquainted with the goddess of horse fare.” The woman reached into the front of her robes and

pulled out a silver amulet that hung around her neck by a long braid of woven horsehair. She held the amulet high. “This is our Lady.”

The amulet dangled tantalizingly in front of me, reflecting flashes of sunlight, enticing me to look more closely. I studied the beautiful etching of a woman astride a proud mare holding a shield. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Yes, yes, yes. I can see in your eyes that you come from us,” the old woman whispered. “Have you received your gift?”

“I am to choose a horse.” My eyes fixed on the sparkling amulet. “That is my gift, for my birthday.”

“Is that so?” replied the woman with a knowing look. She lowered the necklace. “Old Lynne at your service, Milady. Let me show you this impressive horse.” She gestured to the white stallion.

“He’s gorgeous.”

“Is he the horse for you?” Old Lynne put her hand on my arm. “Ask him.”

“Ask him?” The suggestion was ridiculous.

“Go on,” urged the woman, “there is no harm in asking a question of a friend.” She leaned closer. “If you’re embarrassed to be seen speaking with the animal, close your eyes. Ask him with your heart.” Old Lynne’s watery eye flashed a quick wink.

The odd request made me uneasy. I should have walked away, found Merrick and Rhys. Instead, as if I had no choice, I closed my eyes and concentrated. Are you the horse for me?

Opening one eye, I peered at him. The stallion stopped his restlessness and turned his long face toward me. Rings of white

surround his large brown eyes, making him appear as though he was surprised to see me. He bowed his head and moved to the other side of the pen.

Slowly, I shook my head and looked at Old Lynne. “He’s not mine. But how?”

The old woman reached out a dry, cracked hand to my cheek. As the cragged claw was about to graze my face, I felt myself jerk backwards.

“Stand back, woman!” Merrick’s voice burst from behind me.

Merrick grabbed the scruff of my cloak and dragged me through the crowd like a wayward pup. “I promised your father I would keep you safe,” he said, tugging me a little harder. “I expect you will do as I ask and stay close.” He let go of my hood and held my chin so our eyes met. “There are people here who do not have your best interest at heart.”

“Yes sir,” I mumbled. I was still dazed from my encounter with the old woman, and quietly followed as Merrick led me to a pen of horses.

“Deirdre, this is Brendan.” Merrick presented a handsome man of about twenty. “He is one of the finest horse breeders in the land.”

Brendan bowed his head, his long brown hair falling in front of his face. He tucked the loose strands behind his ears as he led me to his charges. Rhys was already amidst the horses, inspecting their feet and checking their teeth.

The young horse keep showed me several of his charges. “Any of these would be a fine ride for a lady,” he said.

I stopped listening. My attention focused on a strong black mare. Her sleek coat rippled with light, like a pool of dark water reflecting the colors of the sky. I looked the horse in the eyes and saw a keen intelligence coupled with a courageous spirit. I saw a companion.

“Deirdre,” Rhys called, “come see this chestnut, he’s huge!”

“No need,” I said softly, stroking the black horse’s jaw, “I’ve found my horse.”

“Well it’s a horse fit for a king. I’ll bet Merrick will want him for the gift.”

I slipped my hands along the horse’s even coat.

“She is not the best choice for you.”

Startled, I turned from the horse. Brendan stood beside me. “She has fine parents and is a quick learner but she has a bad temperament.” He took me by the arm and steered me to a delicate tan horse. “You’ll find this mare a more suitable ride.”

Annoyed at his treating me like a simpleton, I plucked Brendan’s hand from my arm. I was about to say something sharp about his impudence, when, remembering Merrick’s words, I held my tongue, opting for a hard stare instead.

“Oh now you’ve done it.” Rhys handed me a bridle and shook his head at the bewildered horse keep. “She’s not leaving here until she’s proven you wrong.”

I placed a bridle on the black mare and led her out of the pen. The horse reared immediately, almost lifting me from my feet. I held firmly to the reins and pulled the horse back to the ground. The mare steadied. I looked at Brendan and flashed him a cool smile. Rhys knew. I did want to prove to the young

man that I understood animals, but more importantly, I felt I knew this animal. I climbed atop a large tree stump used as a mounting block and hiked my skirts up. I stifled a laugh as Brendan turned away blushing. I swung my leg over the horse's back. Before I was properly seated, the horse bolted. I had no time to be frightened. Wrapping my fingers tight in the horse's mane, I fought for a secure grip with my knees. The mare swerved through the market barely avoiding people shrieking and running out of the way. Finally finding a hold with my legs, I clung to the animal with all my strength.

The great black mare circled the busy marketplace rearing and kicking. Terrified buyers fled the path of the thrashing beast.

Pressing my face into the mare's neck, I spoke soothingly as I reached out and tried to grasp the flailing reins. At last, grabbing the long leather straps in my hand I wound them around my forearm. I pushed in tight with my knees and sat upright on the wild beast. I tugged hard on the reins as the horse made one last attempt to throw me. I held firm, pulling the reins, directing the horse away from the crowds. I sensed the horse begin to relax. Indeed, she put up less of a fight. Her motions smoothed. Bringing the horse to a slow trot, I turned her toward a riding path off through the woods.

Soon I felt the horse in earnest, her rhythm and her strength. Riding this horse was very different from riding Mairwen. I was astride pure power, like riding the air just before a lightning storm. Further down the path, I brought her to a stop. Thinking about what the old woman said, I closed her eyes and took a

deep breath. Cautiously, I allowed the reins to go slack. I freed everything from my mind but the question: Do you belong to me?

A cool breeze made the trees around me tremble. Dry branches clattered, sounding like distant voices whispering excitedly.

Do you belong to me?

When I opened my eyes, I knew this was the horse I must bring home. With a gentle nudge she turned toward the market. As we emerged from the woods, I delighted in the look of wonder on Brendan's face.

"We'll be having a talk about this, Deirdre," said Merrick, shaking his head.

Rhys led out the chestnut as Merrick and Brendan agreed on a trade for both horses. I slipped easily from the mare's back and straightened my dress. Rhys swept his hand over the black horse's coat. "She is beautiful," he said. "What are you going to name her?"

It didn't take me long to know her name. It rang in my ears as if my new friend whispered it to me. "Dylis."

"Let me see," Rhys said, "Whoa, Dylis. Slow, Dylis. I think it will work." He gave me a soft smile. "She'll do you well on your travels."

I grinned. "I can't wait to show her to Ronan."

"He'll be—"

"The trade is done," Merrick announced. "If we leave now, we shall be home before dark."

The market had grown much busier. The crowds surged and

crushed. As I led Dylis through the throng, I was bumped and jostled by passersby eager to get to the animals. As we at last pushed to the outskirts of the market, I noticed a peculiar figure wrapped in old scarlet robes keeping pace with me. Suddenly, a knotted hand reached out and grabbed my wrist, pushing something hard into my palm and folding my fingers over it. In a flicker, the figure was gone, concealed by a passing wave of traders. I opened my hand and caught my breath. There was the silver amulet of Epona. A shiver scurried down my spine. Quickly, I pressed the necklace into my pocket, fingering it as we crossed through the market gates.

“Why if it isn’t my dear friend Sir Berth.” Merrick shouted to a large man with a shock of bright yellow hair. “Greetings my brother. What brings you to these parts?” Merrick trotted his horse over to him.

“Merrick, good to see you,” the knight said in a solemn voice. “I only wish it were in better times.”

“How so?” Merrick asked. “Do you have news?”

“You have been away for some time, my friend. Camelot is presently a house divided.” Berth cast his gaze down and said, “I am here to gather horses for a march on Joyous Guard. To find Lancelot. To what end I do not know.”

“Please, brother,” Merrick said with concern, “start from the beginning and leave nothing out.”

Berth exhaled a sigh of despair. “We all recognized Lancelot’s chaste love for the queen, but that love is no longer so pure,” he said. “Our King has banished them both, and those loyal to Lancelot have followed him. As we speak they make

preparations to sail to Gaul.”

“What of the King?”

“King Arthur sits alone on the throne, bitter. Though, he is far from alone in his animosity.” As he said this, a shield of tears covered the knight’s eyes. “In a tragic event Lancelot slew Gawain’s beloved brother Gareth.”

“No!” Merrick cried. “Not Gareth. Could it have been an accident? He was a favorite of Lancelot’s.”

“Many of us believe that it was a tragic mistake. But Gawain is not a man that forgives easily, even if for the greater good. He wants retribution and the King’s heart is fertile ground for notions of vengeance. Debates among the knights echo throughout the hall. There are many of us who wish to find a way to keep peace in our land, but others thirst only for blood and revenge. This rift is destroying the unity of our brotherhood and, I fear, our country.”

“What are your plans?” Merrick asked. He appeared more serious than I had ever seen him.

“We are gathering forces at Llanfair to make the journey to Lancelot’s castle at Joyous Guard,” Berth answered. “I can only hope that what is best for all will outweigh the passions stirred in our brothers’ breasts. We must heal this rift before it’s too late.”

Merrick clasped Berth’s shoulder. “Collect your horses. I will ride to Camelot at once to offer my services to the King.”

He turned to us. “Deirdre, Rhys, return to your father immediately and tell him the news.” He locked eyes with Rhys. “Report to Ioseff at the barracks. Tell him to ready the men.

Prepare yourself as well, Rhys,” he said. “This may be the time to test your skill.”

Turning to me, he gently took my hand. “It is extremely important you and Nia leave for Degannwy immediately. Take two sound men and arm yourselves well for there are treacherous times ahead. I am sorry I can not offer you more protection, but I am afraid we cannot spare more from the fort.” He squeezed my hand lightly. “Listen to your sister. I know you believe she does not understand you, but she does better than you can imagine. I need your word you will do as I ask”

As he released my hand, I saw in Merrick the call of the knight, the selfless resolve to set things right. I felt the same determination grow in me, that somehow I could do something to help.

“Of course,” I said, trying not to let my voice tremble as much as my heart. I watched as he turned his horse and kicked hard. Horse and rider set off fast, disappearing into the thick trees that lined the road.

Daughter
of
Camelot

Raised in the shadow of a fort dedicated to training Knights of the Round Table, Deirdre thirsts for adventure.

Instead, at 14, she is sent to court to learn the etiquette and talents of a young woman.

Court life, however, is more fraught with danger than she expected, and Deirdre finds herself entangled in a deadly conspiracy that stretches deep into the very heart of Camelot.

All Deirdre thought she knew and believed in - loyalty, love, bravery - is challenged when she embarks on a quest to defy Fate and save the King.



Filled with terrific suspense and budding romance, Daughter of Camelot is a fast paced adventure set against the turmoil at the end of the Arthurian era.



Glynis
Cooney

Cover image: Tim Waite

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